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ABSTRACT

For basic writers, learning to write means learning new syntactic and textual forms and new ways of relating to an audience. This means that students must have certain kinds of knowledge about what differentiates writing from speech and what distinguishes sentences and texts/paragraphs that are focused and explicit. In addition, an enabling environment must provide ample opportunities, and plans for composing sentences and texts and for interacting with readers of those texts. There are three types of basic writers: (1) those who require more than one semester of writing practice before advancing to college composition; (2) those who make rapid progress, who need remediation only in specific areas, and for whom one term of practice is sufficient; and (3) those whose end-of-the-term skills seem adequate for college composition placement but who sometimes fail. As a result of their individual learning rates and varying levels of preparation, basic writers require various lengths of time in which to take advantage of writing strategies such as sentence combining, prewriting, writing, rewriting, group readings of student papers, and out-of-class conferencing with teachers and peer tutors. (HOD)

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BASIC FORMS, BASIC WRITERS

For basic writers, learning to write means learning new syntactic and textual forms and new ways of relating to an audience. However "natural" writing may appear, it involves a complex performance of many skills or capabilities that differ substantially from speech, capabilities, that is, that must be learned, stored, and used over time. This means students must have certain kinds of knowledge in their heads about how written sentences and texts are constructed. And the teachers of basic writers must provide the enabling environments for their inexperienced writers to learn and produce through practice written sentences and texts.

Gunther Kress in Learning to Write demonstrates the distinct syntactic organization of writing. In fact, "the sentence is not a unit of typical spoken language" but "belongs to writing . . . . [It] may occur in speech as a borrowing of the syntax of writing, but speech, typically, is organized on the basis of clausal complexes which are not sentences. They may be long chains of clauses linked by co-ordination or simply by being adjoined. While the sentence typically is a structure of main and subordinated and embedded clauses, the clausal complex is typically an aggregate rather than a syntactic structure."[1] Coordination of simple clauses--chaining--is the dominant structural form of speech; the written sentence, on the other hand, is hierarchical.

Composing written sentences then is not simply a way of recording speech, nor does writing directly represent speech.

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Basic writers in their early attempts to produce written sentences more often than not fail, as is to be expected. Since they are generally unfamiliar with, or have an inadequate command of, written sentences, their sentences are often inefficient, uneconomical, and unpredictable for readers. These problems may arise for a number of reasons, stemming from either their reliance on spoken forms or their simple ignorance of certain structures that occur mainly in written language. Thus, we have sentences like the following:

1) People do it just to have fun and get someone pregnant and end up marrying someone you don't love.

2) The main event in my life that happened to me that I felt changed my life is when I left home at the age of 15.

3) Naturally, the blanket comes from a brilliant and amazing snow storm from which some are pretty bad.

The practical implication, therefore, is that the characteristic patterns of written sentences must be learned. The enabling environment must include a sentence program, for as Mina Shaughnessy wrote in Errors and Expectations, the question of basic writers is not "How can I make this sentence better?" but "How can I make this sentence right?"[2]

In addition to learning written sentences, the basic writer must learn to construct a written text. Indeed, as Gunther Kress writes, "the creation of a text by the [learner] himself or herself is quite a new task."[3] For one thing, a written text, unlike a spoken text, is not created mutually, through interaction, where the speaker can gauge the effectiveness of his communication on his audience and communicate from cues. The reader of a

written text has only the text, with no other context to assist him. A piece of writing, therefore, must be made more explicit; it has to stand on its own. More often than not, basic writers' prose does not compensate for the lack of a physically present audience because they do not at first understand the need for writing to represent meaning more fully than speaking. James Collins, in "Speaking, Writing, and Teaching for Meaning," writes that asking basic writers what they mean is probably the most fundamental and useful question we can present to them.[4] If asked this question, the writer of the following paper could more easily make his point for the reader.

A Most Significant Journey

> The most significant trip I have taken in the past has been to Kings Island. The trip may not be significant to some people, but as for myself it did a great deal. Kings Island gave me a chance to escape from the every day routine. In fact, that was the singular aim involved. The car ride down to Kings Island was in itself enjoyable. A trip to Kings Island [gave] me a chance to step back and take a look at the world around me.

Besides producing writing that is explicit, our student writers are judged on their ability to construct texts--in our case mainly paragraphs--which also have focus, or unity, another feature of what is called "reader-based prose."[5] Mina Shaughnessy, for one, has accurately assessed the prose of basic writers as showing "more the quality of a writer's inner, pre-verbalized thought, not yet shaped for communication."[6] While "writing can be viewed in part as a technology for holding vast and complex units of thought together," "getting sidetracked," "shifting points in midstream," or "drifting from stated general purposes toward personal reverie" are common with basic writers.[7] Such is the case with the following student paper.

Reading and Writing in My Life

> Reading and Writing makes me feel good at times. Some times when I sit down, and say in my mind I have to put my brain to work, I realize that I have something to write, I got a habit of saying, I just can't think of nothing to say, and in my past experiences my teacher is always saying there's plenty of things to write about. Reading is not much of a problem; however, at times I'am always finding myself forgetting what I read. To keep myself Reading and Writing at a nice pace, I really have to write on something that I have an interest in, or something that pops in my mind. Writing sometimes can make my handwriting very sloppy, but it also gives me some good ideas to write about. Reading always makes me look out of the window to see whats going on, and sometimes when I do look out I can think of a lot of exciting things I would like to do. When I'am writing I always have trouble keeping my pen stiff; therefore, it becomes hard for me to keep straight letters looking neat.

The practical implication here is that our speech-oriented basic writers must learn through practice to accommodate the demands and requirements of a reader when they write: to learn progressively to internalize writing-for-a-reader, and to learn progressively to control their information.

All this is not to say that writing something of personal significance, developing personal voice in writing, or writing to learn or discover are being given short shrift. It is only that the basics of writing--what differentiates writing from speech, i.e., sentences and texts/paragraphs that are focused and explicit--must be practiced and made habitual.

Classroom Practices

For inexperienced and unpracticed student writers to learn control of the written language, an enabling environment must provide ample opportunities and a plan for composing sentences and texts and for interacting with readers of those texts. Here is one plan that places composing and the student-as-writer writing to readers at the center of the curriculum.

Through sentence combining students learn basic sentence patterns and the ways in which base sentences are lengthened and given more detail--coordination, subordination, modification--and develop a "feel," an "eye," and an "ear" for the written sentence versus the spoken sentence. It is principally the actual writing out and reading aloud of sentences that make sentence combining such a powerful technique.

It is important to make students, especially basic writers, aware of the process they should work through when they write. Segmenting writing into manageable stages for the basic writer conveniently separates creating from criticizing, writing from revising, and writing for himself from writing for a reader. This segmenting--prewriting for ideas, writing, and rewriting (preparing for a reader)--also encourages feedback from peers and teachers during the writing process instead of only afterwards, allowing writers to rethink and rewrite to bring their writing more in line with their intentions. As students move through the process and as they move from one writing assignment to the next, they learn through practice and interaction to shape what at first are only rough paragraphs into ones that have a focus or central idea, a unified structure, and detailed, specific support.

In-class collaboration, or group readings of student papers, and out-of-class conferencing with teachers and peer tutors teach inexperienced writers the importance of the reader's role in their writing and ultimately convincingly demonstrate the need for focus, structure, clarity, correctness, and explicitness.

Profiles of Typical Basic Writers

Because of individual learning rates and varying levels of preparation, our basic writers, we have found, require various lengths of time in which to take advantage of the writing strategies mentioned above. The profiles that follow, we feel, typically represent both the wide range of basic writers and their different rates of progress.

I. The basic writer who requires more than one semester of writing practice before advancing to college composition.

Something that makes me angry

> When you're driving behind someone who doesn't use their blinkers to turn. That can cause a lot of accidents, that could have been helped. Or when some of us jet out of one lane into the next, without using a signal.
>
> And standing in line for hours, to find that the class you want is filled.
>
> Going to the store when there's a sale and you can't find your size or color. Or their simple sold out.
>
> When you discover you spend more than you intended to spend.

The above paragraph, written by an entering basic writing student, is typical of papers of inexperienced writers. Unfamiliar with the necessity of satisfying a reader, this writer relied on that which was familiar, the spoken mode, thus the conversational tone, the informal "you," and lack of unity. The several ideas appear as a list, a series of random personal musings, each undoubtedly related to a specific real-life event; however, lacking practice and experience, the writer was unable to develop them into a paper to be read and enjoyed.

A second paragraph, written by the same student at approximately midpoint in the fifteen-week term, shows her progress.

Something Difficult

> Swimming is very difficult for me. While trying to turn my head from side to side, breath, move my legs, and my arms is very difficult. I can recall my first experience in learning to swim. A girl-friend and I went to the center, for a little swimming fun; however, it wasn't as easy as we thought. First you take a shower then go into the swimming pool. There were lots of children there swimming and some who couldn't like my friend and I, so we didn't feel all alone. It was a little girl watching us and probably laughing at us to herself, saying, let me see if I can help these ladies out. She came over where we were and told us what we were doing wrong. So again I tried all the movements; however, when I felt myself relax I felt like I was sinking to the bottom and I stood up. The water was only five foot deep; therefore, I knew I wouldn't drown, because I'm five foot-three. Consequently, I tried over, and over again and each time I felt better about learning to swim.

A strong, limited focus, specificity, and structure are evidence of a realized need to satisfy her reader. Contextually, significant strides have been made. That the writer, with her emerging skills, has struggled to produce clear, mature sentences is also apparent, but one senses in her use of sequential order, transitions, and embedding that she has gained a degree of control and syntactic sophistication.

The next paragraph was produced toward the end of the term by the same writer.

What I like Most About Myself

> The best thing I like about myself is I care about people. I have concern about people, that really makes me feel great inside. Whenever I can help them in some way. Like where I stay there are quit a few elder people who need someone to help them with things like, going to the store or moving something heavy. Or my girlfriend who works, sometimes needs a baby sitter for her little

> girl or someone may want an errand ran that is to far to walk for them. Since I have a car it is easier for me. But this is the best quality I like most about myself.

The contrast between this third paragraph and the one preceding it is typical of the unevenness of some students' efforts: while there has been an attempt to provide details and sentence variety, there are also fragments, fewer details, implicitness, and repetition. A reader is aware of limited control and uncertainty, as in the "correction" of intended sentence four. The writer's tenuous grasp of earlier skills appears to have weakened somewhat as she concentrated on newer structures and struggled to provide substantive content. For her the basic skills have not become habitual. Clearly, she is not yet prepared to enter regular freshman composition.

II. The basic writer who makes rapid progress, who needs remediation only in specific areas, and for whom one term's practice is sufficient.

Future Planning

> The world, as it has come to be, spends less and less time with their children. And so, in the class room it has carried over. Most students are confused and unaware of the future, and what it might bring. Students go to school for twelve years, they have a lot of questions. Questions that might not be answered unless a special class, such as the one I am referring, is offered. These questions needed answered, so they would have time to adapt and comprehend the life style, which they are about to lead. I believe that if students would have a course in future planning, some of the mistakes made, because of lack of communication and knowledge, might have been avoided. Bringing to our adult world, people spending less time mending mistakes and more time advancing toward their goals.

This writing represents the writing of another kind of basic writer, one who, unlike many of his peers, does in fact recognize that he is writing for a reader. However, it is his perception of his audience that actually interferes with his effectiveness. In his attempt to imitate what he thinks is academic language, he creates instead a parody. Straining with impressive-sounding prose, he fails to establish his ideas clearly. One also senses that this writer began without a plan, plunging into his task and groping for expression as he wrote. Sentence problems also mar his effort.

The following paragraph, however, composed after just three weeks' practice reflects the same writer's quickly acquired ability not only to understand his audience, but also to express himself with clarity and specificity. Subsequent efforts, moreover, continued to show a sustained high level of progress.

An Important Person in My Life

> Just by looking at my second cousin Bruce brings a smile to my face, although I can't really pin point the reason for my reaction, whether it is his smirky smile or ornery deep brown eyes. His features overall are handsome and at the same time show his crazy personality all in a glance. His dark brown hair has no definite part and is combed back with a modern G.Q. look. More rusty than his hair, his beard and mustache give a deceivingly mature appearance, set off by his rigidly distinct nose that ends abruptly and narrowly. My cousin loves the night life, coming home only to change into another pair of blue jeans and flannel or tea shirt which fill three-fourths of his closet. Taking chances and living on a seconds notice has brought him many pleasures, including his own farm, own equipment and he is a foreman for Grase Corporation. He also owns a van, a car, and four wheel drive truck which he uses to pull a modified tractor he built and pulls during the summer. His life has had bumps but in the long run seems to be running very smoothly.

The following is the initial writing effort of another incoming college freshman, who, like the previous student, required only a moderate amount of instruction.

Something That Makes me Angry

> One of my friends, John owns a snowmobile. Recently there has been a lot of snow, at times more snow than needed. John has been saying there has not been enough snow to go riding. He said that there has to be at least five inches for his snowmobile. Yesterday there was approximately three inches on the ground. He took his snowmobile over to one of our friends houses last night and rode. This gets me angry because at times, before yesterday there was more snow than three inches. We have talked about riding with him off and on for the last two weeks.

A reader of this diagnostic theme must participate, cooperate, too fully to discover the intention of the writer, whose point is fairly well "buried," albeit in what are for the most part grammatically and mechanically correct sentences. His early endeavor resembles speech in its implicitness: it would be easily understood by a good friend in a mutual telephone conversation. The writer--placed in a developmental writing course on the basis of high school grades, an ACT writing score, and a writing sample--found that sentence-combining practice and an emphasis on contextual clarity in a very short time increased his repertoire of syntactic options and enhanced the readability of his prose:

A Difficult Thing I had to Do

> Ending a month long vacation to Southport North Carolina was a difficult thing for me to do. My grandparents owned an aged home that overlooked the broad Cape Fear River. Living only minutes away from the warm Atlantic beaches, there was always something to do. There were always people to meet, places to go, things to see, and activities to participate in. I could always fish off of the pier across the street, or do one of several things

> out at the beach. It wasn't just this place that was hard to leave, I left behind several people I had become close to. Here, I had made some really good friends and experienced my first love. During the evening Vicki, my girlfriend, and I would sit on my grandparents front porch. We could just sit there for hours, swinging in the glowing moonlight as an occasional ship passed by. I had always been close to my grandparents, but this month I spent with them was extra special. I felt that it brought us closer than we had ever been. I knew leaving this place and these people behind would be one of lives most difficult moments. As I was in the car driving away I couldn't help to think of what I was leaving behind. The mood was only damped more by the thought of the twelve hour ride to cold and rainy Ohio. Now I am here in Ohio, nevertheless part of me is still in Southport.

The writer this time made his point--clearly and well. Because the paragraph is focused, structured, explicit, and descriptive, it is satisfying to read.

III. The basic writer whose end-of-the-term skills seem adequate for college composition placement but who sometimes fails.

The composition below seems familiar to any teacher of inexperienced writers; it typifies the numerous problems faced by many as they begin an academic term: lack of specificity, grammatical and syntactic errors, incorrect punctuation, little audience awareness, and no real development.

Something That Makes Me Angry

> A thing that makes me angry is when a person borrow things from me and they don't return it, or either they ruined it. The reason that makes me angry, is because when you are nice enough to let that person borrow it, they should try to be considerate and return it back to you. They shouldn't try to take advantage of you.

The breadth of this writer's potential, though perhaps not obvious at the outset, soon became apparent. The paper shown below was written after two

months' time, during which her competence steadily increased. (It is such progress by other basic writers that accounts for teachers' optimistic refusal to join their often disheartened students in negative expectations as they begin a semester of work together.)

A Difficult Thing I Had to Do

> The difficult situation I had to go through was dealing with my brother's death. It was the year March 10, 1976 Manuel, Jr., eldest of ten children, passed away. His death became a sudden shock to me, for at that time I was eleven years old, and it was difficult for me to try to understand his death. I kept asking myself, "Why him? of all the people in the world, why my brother?" I felt as though I had lost a part of me when my brother died. He was always there when I needed a answer or advice; furthermore, he was someone I could count on when I needed a hug. After my brother's death, I understood more about death. It made me see that death can come anytime. Whether we're young, or old we are going to die. It made me see that we should try to love and live each day at a time, for my brother, a strong and courageous man, lived his to the fullest. In conclusions, we all should live our lives to the fullest, for tomorrow is not promise to us.

That the writer acquired an insight into what was needed to produce an interesting, readable text shows in her strong, limited focus, use of embedding, inclusion of specific details, and expression of personal feelings.

Encouraged after overcoming some major difficulties, this writer began to cope with matters of lesser concern. Through the process approach there was ample time to read and reread, to listen and to test, to proofread and correct her work. Having gained a measure of control over writing, enough at least to consider entering a regular freshman composition class, she began to feel confident in her abilities. The paper that follows was produced about three-fourths of the way through the term.

An Embarrassing Moment

> The most embarrassing moment for me is when I was attending a talent show at my old high school. It began when I arrived at the school. I saw lots of people standing around the building; therefore, I decided to go over and see what was going on. All at once people started pushing and shoving every which way into the building. This is when I got embarrassed, because for some odd reason I was the one out of the crowd who fell down the stairs. It happened so quickly, for I missed a step, tumbled, and kept tumbling until I hit the cement. Regina, who was my friend, noticed my fall and asked very loudly, if I was ok. I replied yes, very harshly, gritting my teeth, for I didn't want anyone to know that it was I that had fallen. Regina's asking out loud if I was ok drew other attention to the incident. After everyone knew I was fine they laughed at me for quite a while, teasing me very much. I should be more careful next time about being in a group of people who is pushing, for you never know what to expect.

Though the paper tends to fade somewhat near its conclusion, it successfully demonstrates sustained strength and indicates a student readiness for college-level composition placement. It is interesting to note the similarities in the diagnostic themes of this writer and the first student above, who, unlike this writer at term's end, was not ready for such advancement. The difference lies in the kind of progress made by each: the potential of the fourth writer showed itself early, and with much hard work and teacher/peer intervention early on, she progressed rapidly. Students like this one, whose end-of-term skills may not be completely automatic, or habitual, we have found, <u>usually</u> succeed in regular English courses--but not always. Such a quickly built and therefore fragile competence typical of the marginal writer may suffer setbacks if the demands of regular college composition are too numerous or too competitive.

<u>Some Implications for Teaching</u>

1. There is a limit to the amount of information and number of concepts basic writers can assimilate, and so they should not be overwhelmed with

secondary elements that can be learned later in the developmental process. "Right from the start," writes Harvey Wiener, in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, "beginners at writing need everything all at once, all the skills in language, form, and structure that each task demands. Yet instructors of beginners know that to try to teach everything at once is to be stuck in a quagmire of good intentions."[8] What is primary, what must become automatic, is the composition of sentences and paragraphs that are focused and explicit.

2. Less homogeneous than other writing classes, Basic Writing enrolls students with enormous individual differences in rates of learning and a wide range of problems, and so requires small class sizes (15-17 students per section) supplemented by extensive tutoring by instructors and peers.

3. If one were to chart the progress of a class of basic writers over a semester's time, he would probably find that many students make fairly rapid gains early on but, challenged by accumulating demands, they frequently reach plateaus or even periods of regression. It is important for students to realize that such erratic growth can be expected. Further, because their competence is so fragile, it is also important that at these stages they be allowed ample time for practice and reinforcement, a nurturing period in which to more fully integrate their skills and build consistent strength.

4. While it is true that students require a great deal of encouragement, assistance, and discussion as they stretch for competence (and many strong writing programs offer much ancillary support), developing writers after a time must, finally, become somewhat independent in their efforts. When they reach freshman English courses, whether because of class size or other considerations, students may be forced to function, for the most part, independently. A plan of diminishing intervention, then, seems necessary if basic writers are to acquire a sense of self-reliance as they gain control and move closer to college-level courses.

Our intent in this paper has been to profile typical basic writers, showing the kinds of progress they make given an environment whose primary emphasis is on the truly basic skills that they must develop and make habitual in order to produce writing to be read. Certainly these are not the only skills necessary to create a successful piece of writing; however, for speech-oriented students they constitute the turning point on which further instruction and development occur.

Notes

[1]Gunther Kress, Learning to Write (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 7.

[2]Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 44.

[3]Kress, p. 98.

[4]James L. Collins, "Speaking, Writing, and Teaching for Meaning," Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships: Connections and Contrasts, ed. Barry M. Kroll and Roberta J. Vann (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1981), p. 213.

[5]Linda S. Flower, "Revising Writer-Based Prose," Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall/Winter, 1981).

[6]Shaughnessy, p. 232.

[7]Shaughnessy, pp. 231-233.

[8]Harvey S. Wiener, "Basic Writing: First Days' Thoughts on Process and Detail," Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1980), p. 87.